

Moon of Israel ~ By Sir H. Rider Haggard

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Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

PRINCE SETI, heir to the throne of Egypt, forms a strong liking for Ana, a learned scribe, and takes him into his palace at Tanis as his private librarian. While walking through the city they see an old Hebrew slave brutally slain by an Egyptian captain. The slain man's daughter Merapi, known for her beauty as "Moon of Israel," appeals to Seti, who promptly orders the captain beheaded. In Pharaoh's court the next day two prophets of Israel demand the release of their people. When Pharaoh refuses they curse him and his land. At Seti's request his father sends him into Goshen to investigate the tales of injustice to the Hebrews. With him, lest he be too tender-hearted, is sent his cousin, Amenmeses. To insure the royal succession Pharaoh commands the marriage of Prince Seti with his half-sister, Princess Usertil. Bakenkhonsu and Ki, wise men of the court, warn the Prince of dangers threatening in his mission among the Hebrews. Accordingly the Princess gives Seti and Ana coats of mail and swords for their protection.

CHAPTER VI.

The Land of Goshen.

THE Prince Seti and all his train, a very great company, came in safety to the land of Goshen, I, Ana, traveling with him in his chariot. It was then as now a rich land, quite flat after the last line of desert hills through which we travelled by a narrow, tortuous path. Everywhere it was watered by canals, between which lay the grain fields wherein the seed had just been sown. Also there were other fields of green fodder whereon were tethered beasts by the hundred, and beyond these, upon the drier soil, grazed flocks of sheep.

The town Goshen, if so it could be called, was but a poor place, numbers of mud huts, no more, in the centre of which stood a building, also of mud, with two brick pillars in front of it, that we were told was the temple of this people, into the inner parts of which none might enter save their High Priest. I laughed at the sight of it, but the Prince reproved me, saying that I should not judge of the spirit of the body or of the god by his house.

We camped outside this town and soon learned that the people who dwelt in it or elsewhere in other towns must be numbered by the ten thousand, for more of them than I could count wandered round the camp to look at us. The men were fierce-eyed and hook-nosed; the young women well-shaped and pleasant to behold; the older women for the most part stout and somewhat unwieldy, and the children very beautiful. All were roughly clad in robes of loosely-woven, dark-colored cloth, beneath which the women wore garments of white linen. Notwithstanding the wealth we saw about us in corn and cattle, their ornaments seemed to be few, or perhaps these were hidden from our sight.

It was easy to see that they hated us Egyptians and even dared to despise us. Hate shone in their glittering eyes, and I heard them calling us the "idol-worshippers" one to the other and asking where was our god, the Bull, for, being ignorant, they thought that we worshipped Apis (as mayhap some of the common people do) instead of looking upon the sacred beast as a symbol of the powers of nature.

Indeed, they did more, for on the first night after our coming they slaughtered a bull marked much as Apis is, and in the morning we found it lying near the gate of the camp, and pinned to its hide with sharp thorns great numbers of the scabrous beetle still living. For again they did not know that among us Egyptians this beetle is no god, but an emblem of the Creator, because it rolls a ball of mud between its feet and sets therein its eggs to hatch, as the Creator rolls the world that seems to be round and causes it to produce life.

Now all were angry at these insults except the Prince, who laughed and said that he thought the jest coarse but clever. But worse was to happen. It seems that a soldier with wine in him had done insult to a Hebrew maiden who came alone to draw water at a canal. The news spread among the people and some thousands of them rushed to the camp, shouting and demanding vengeance in so threatening a manner that it was necessary to form up the regiments of guards.

The Prince being summoned commanded that the girl and her kin should be admitted and state their case. She came, weeping and wailing and tearing her garments, throwing dust on her head also, though it appeared that she had taken no great harm from the soldier from whom she ran away. The Prince bade her point out the man if she could see him, and she showed us one of the bodyguard of the Count Amenmeses, whose face was scratched as though by a woman's nails. On being questioned he said he could remember little of the matter, but confessed that he had seen the maiden by the canal at moonrise and jested with her.

The kin of this girl clamored that he should be killed, because he had offered insult to a high-born lady of Israel. This Seti refused, saying that the offence was not one of death, but that he would order him to be publicly beaten.

Thereupon Amenmeses, who was fond of the soldier, a good man enough when not in his cups, sprang up in a rage, saying that no servant of his should be touched because he had offered to caress some light Israelitish woman who had no business to be wandering about alone at night. He added that if the man were flogged he said all those under his command would leave the camp and march back to make report to Pharaoh.

Now the Prince, having consulted with the councillors, told the woman and her kin that as Pharaoh had been appealed to, he must judge of the matter, and commanded them to appear at his court within a month and state their case against the soldier. They went away very ill-satisfied, saying that Amenmeses had insulted their daughter even more than his servant had done. The end of the matter was that on the following night this soldier was discovered dead, pierced through and through with knife thrusts. The girl, her parents and brethren could not be found, having fled away into the desert, nor was there any evidence to show by whom the soldier

had been murdered. Therefore nothing could be done in the business except bury the victim.

On the following morning the inquiry began with due ceremony, the Prince Seti and the Count Amenmeses taking their seats at the head of a large pavilion with the councillors behind them, and the scribes, among whom I was, seated at their feet. Then we learned that the two prophets whom I had seen at Pharaoh's court were not in the land of Goshen, having left before we arrived "to sacrifice to God in the wilderness," nor did any know when they would return.

Other elders and priests, however, appeared and began to set out their case,

which they did at great length and in a fierce and turbulent fashion, speaking often all of them at once, thus making it difficult for the interpreters to render their words, since they pretended that they did not know the Egyptian tongue.

Moreover, they told their story from the very beginning, when they had entered Egypt hundreds of years before, and were succored by the vizier of the Pharaoh of that day, one Yusuf, a powerful and clever man of their race, who stored corn in a time of famine and low Nile. This Pharaoh was of the Hyksos people, one of the Shepherd kings, whom we Egyptians hated and after many wars drove out of Khem. Under these Shepherd kings, being joined by many of their own blood, the Israelites grew rich and powerful, so that the Pharaohs who came after and who loved them not began to fear them.

This was as far as the story was taken on the first day.

On the second day began the tale of their oppression, under which, however, they still multiplied like gnats upon the Nile, and grew so strong and numerous that at length the great Rameses died a wicked thing, ordering that their male children should be put to death. This order was never carried out, because his daughter, she who found Moses among the reeds of the river, pleaded for them.

At this point the Prince, wearied with the noise and heat in that crowded place, broke off the sitting until the morrow. Commanding me to accompany him, he ordered a chariot, not his own, to be made ready, and, although I prayed him not to do so, set out unguarded save for myself and the charioteer, saying that he would see how these people labored with his own eyes.

Taking a Hebrew lad to run before the horses as our guide, we drove to the banks of a canal where the Israelites made bricks of mud which, after drying in the sun, were laden into boats that waited for them on the canal and taken away to other parts of Egypt to be used on Pharaoh's works. Thousands of men were engaged upon this labor, toiling in gangs under the command of Egyptian overseers who kept count of the bricks, cutting their number upon tally sticks, or sometimes writing them upon shreds. These overseers were brutal fellows, for the most part of a low class, who used vile language to the slaves. Nor were they content with words.

Noting a crowd gathered at one place

and hearing cries, we went to see what passed. Here we found a lad stretched upon the ground being cruelly beaten with hide whips, so that the blood ran down him. At a sign from the Prince I asked what he had done and was told roughly, for the overseers and their guards did not know who we were, that during the past six days he had only made half of his allotted tale of bricks.

"Loose him," said the Prince quietly. "Who are you that give me orders?" asked the head overseer, who was helping to hold the lad while the guards flogged him. "Begone, lest I serve you as I serve this idle fellow."

Seti looked at him, and as he looked his lips turned white. "Tell him," he said to me. "You dog!" I gasped. "Do you know who it is to whom you dare speak thus?" "No, nor care. Lay on, guard."

The Prince, whose robes were hidden by a wide-sleeved cloak of common stuff and make, threw the cloak open revealing be-

waited, bade the driver cross the canal by a bridge there was here. We drove on a while in silence, following a track which ran between the cultivated land and the desert. At length I pointed to the sinking sun and asked if it were not time to return.

"Why?" replied the Prince. "The sun dies, but there rises the full moon to give us light, and what have we to fear with swords at our sides and her Highness Usertil's mail beneath our robes? Oh! Ana, I am weary of men with their cruelties and shouts and struggles, and I find this wilderness a place of rest, for in it I seem to draw nearer to my own soul and the Heaven whence it came, or so I hope."

"Your Highness is fortunate to have a soul to which he cares to draw near; it is not so with all of us," I answered laughing, for I sought to change the current of his thoughts by provoking argument of a sort that he loved.

Just then, however, the horses, which were not of the best, came to a halt on a slope of heavy sand. Nor would Seti allow

Then I understood, perhaps for the first time, that it is the spirit which gives true beauty both to maid and man and not the flesh. The white vase of alabaster, however shapely, is still a vase alone; it is the hidden lamp within that graces it with the glory of a star. And those eyes, those large, dreaming eyes as with tears and hued like richest lapis-lazuli, oh! what man could look on them and not be stirred?

"Merapi!" I whispered. "Moon of Israel!" murmured Seti, "filled with the moon, lovely as the moon, mystic as the moon and worshipping the moon, her mother."

"She is in trouble; let us help her," I said.

"Nay, wait a while, Ana, for never again shall you and I see such a sight as this." Low as we spoke beneath our breath, I think the lady heard us. At least her face changed and grew frightened. Hastily she rose, lifted the great bundle of straw upon which she had been kneeling and placed it on her head. She ran a few steps, then

"In truth I do not know," replied Seti, forgetting his feigned voice. Then, seeing that she glanced at him sharply, he added in gruff tones:

"Brother, either this woman lies or she is none other than the maid they call Moon of Israel, who dwells with old Jabez the Levite, her uncle. What think you?"

"I think, brother, that she lies, and for three reasons," I answered, falling into the jest. "First she is too fair to be of the black Hebrew blood."

"Oh, sirs!" moaned Merapi, "my mother was a Syrian lady of the mountains, with a skin as white as milk and eyes blue as the heavens."

"Secondly," I went on without heeding her, "if the great Prince Seti is really in Goshen and she dwells there, it is unnatural that she should not have gone to look upon him. Being a woman only two things would have kept her away; one—that she feared and hated him, which she denies, and the other—that she liked him too well, and, being prudent, thought it wisest not to look upon him more."

When she heard the first of these words Merapi glanced up with her lips parted as though to answer. Instead, she dropped her eyes and suddenly seemed to choke, while even in the moonlight I saw the red blood pour to her brow and along her white arms.

"Sir," she gasped, "why should you affront me? I swear that never till this moment did I think such a thing. Surely it would be treason."

"Without doubt," interrupted Seti, "yet one of a sort that kings might pardon."

"Thirdly," I went on as though I heard neither of them, "if this girl were what she declares, she would not be wandering alone in the desert at night, seeing that I have heard among the Arabs that Merapi, daughter of Nathan the Levite, is a lady of no mean blood among the Hebrews and that her family has wealth. Still, however much she lies, we can see for ourselves that she is beautiful."

"Yes, brother, in that we are fortunate, since without doubt she will sell for a high price among the slave traders beyond the desert."

"Oh, sirs!" cried Merapi, seizing the hem of his robe, "surely you who I feel, I know not why, are no evil thief, who have a mother and, perchance, sisters, would not doom a maiden to such a fate. Misjudge me not because I am alone. Pharaoh has commanded that we must find straw for the making of bricks. This morning I came far to search for it on behalf of a neighbor whose wife is ill in childbirth. But toward sundown I slipped and cut myself upon the edge of a sharp stone. See," and holding up her foot she showed a wound beneath the instep from which the blood still dropped, a sight that moved both of us not a little, "and now I cannot walk and carry this heavy straw which I have been at such pains to gather."

"Perchance she speaks truth, brother," said the Prince, "and if we took her home we might earn a small reward from Jabez the Levite. But first tell me, maiden, what was that prayer which you made to the moon, that Hathor should help your heart?"

"Sir," she answered, "only the idolatrous Egyptians pray to Hathor, the Lady of Love." "I thought that all the world prayed to the Lady of Love, maiden. But what of the prayer? Is there some man whom you desire?"

"None," she answered angrily. "Then why does your heart need so much help that you ask it of the air? Is there perchance someone whom you do not desire?"

She hung her head and made no answer. "Come, brother," said the Prince, "this lady is weary of us, and I think that if she were a true woman she would answer our questions more readily. Let us go and leave her. As she cannot walk we can take her later if we wish."

"Sirs," she said, "I am glad that you are going, since the hyenas will be safer company than two men who can threaten to sell a helpless woman into slavery. Yet as we part to meet no more I will answer your question. In the prayer to which you were not ashamed to listen I did not pray for any lover; I prayed to be rid of one."

"Now, Ana," said the Prince, bursting into laughter and throwing back his dark cloak, "do you discover the name of that unhappy man of whom the lady Merapi wishes to be rid, for I dare not."

She gazed into his face and uttered a little cry.

"Ah!" she said, "I thought I knew the voice again when once you forgot your part. Prince Seti, does your Highness think that this was a kind jest to practice upon one alone and in fear?"

"Lady Merapi," he answered smiling, "be not wroth, for at least it was a good one and you have told us nothing that we did not know. You may remember that at Tanis you said that you were affianced and there was that in your voice—Suffer me now to tend this wound of yours."

Then he knelt down, tore a strip from his ceremonial robe of fine linen, and began to bind up her foot, not unskillfully, being a man full of strange and unexpected knowledge. As he worked at the task, watching them, I saw their eyes meet, saw, too, that rich flood of color creep once more to Merapi's brow. Then I began to think it unseemly that the Prince of Egypt should play the leech to a woman's hurts in the desert, and to wonder why he had not left that humble task to me.

Presently the bandaging was done and made fast with a royal scarabaeus mounted on a pin of gold, which the Prince wore in his garments. On it was cut the ureus crown and beneath it were the signs which



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the driver to flog them, but commanded him to let them rest a space. While they did so we descended from the chariot and walked up the desert rise, he leaning on my arm. As we reached its crest we heard sobs and a soft voice speaking on the further side. Who it was that spoke and sobbed we could not see, because of a line of tamarisk shrubs which once had been a fence.

"More cruelty, or at least more sorrow," whispered Seti. "Let us look."

So we crept to the tamarisks, and peeping through their feathery tops, saw a very sweet sight in the pure rays of that desert moon. There, not five paces away, stood a woman clad in white, young and shapely in form. Her face we could not see because it was turned from us, also the long dark hair which streamed about her shoulders hid it. She was praying aloud, speaking now in Hebrew, of which both of us knew something, and now in Egyptian, as does one who is accustomed to think in either tongue, and stopping from time to time to sob.

"O God of my people," she said, "send me succor and bring me safe home, that Thy child may not be left alone in the wilderness to become the prey of wild beasts or of men who are worse than beasts."

Then she sobbed, knelt down on a great bundle which I saw was stubble straw, and again began to pray. This time it was in Egyptian, as though she feared lest the Hebrew should be overheard and understood.

"O God," she said, "O God of my fathers, help my poor heart, help my poor heart!" We were about to withdraw, or rather to ask her what ailed her, when suddenly she turned her head, so that the light fell full upon her face. So lovely was it that I caught my breath and the Prince at my side started. Indeed it was more than lovely, for as a lamp shines through an alabaster vase or a shell of pearl so did the spirit within this woman shine through her tear-stained face, making it mysterious as the night.

stumbled and sank down with a little moan of pain. In an instant we were at her side. She stared at us affrighted, for who we were she could not see because of the wide hoods of our common cloaks that made us look like midnight thieves or slave-dealing Bedouins.

"Oh, sirs!" she babbled, "harm me not. I have nothing of value on me save this amulet."

"Who are you and what do you here?" asked the Prince, disguising his voice.

"Sirs, I am Merapi, the daughter of Nathan the Levite, he whom the accursed Egyptian captain, Khuaka, murdered at Tanis."

"How do you dare call the Egyptians accursed?" asked Seti in tones made gruff to hide his laughter.

"Oh, sirs, because they are—I mean because I thought you were Arabs who hate them, as we do. At least this Egyptian was accursed, for the high Prince Seti, Pharaoh's heir, caused him to be beheaded for that crime."

"And do you also hate the high Prince Seti, Pharaoh's heir, and call him accursed?"

She hesitated, then in a doubtful voice said:

"No, I do not hate him."

"Why not, seeing that you hate the Egyptians, of whom he is one of the first and therefore twice worthy of hatred, being the son of your oppressor, Pharaoh?"

"Because, although I have tried my best, I cannot. Also," she added with the joy of one who has found a good reason, "he avenged my father."

"This is no cause, girl, seeing that he only did what the law forced him to do. They say that this dog of a Pharaoh's son is here in Goshen upon some mission. Is it true, and have you seen him? Answer, for we of the desert folk desire to know."

"I believe it is true, sir, but I have not seen him."

"Because I did not wish to, sir. Why should a daughter of Israel desire to look upon the face of a prince of Egypt?"